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June 15, 2010

## **NRCS Issues Final Rule for Conservation Stewardship Program, Extends Deadline**

TEMPLE, TEXAS, June 15, 2010 –The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has published the final regulations governing the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill, CSP is a voluntary program that offers payments to producers who exercise good land stewardship and want to improve their conservation performance.

NRCS has also extended the enrollment period for an additional two weeks, now closing June 25, 2010.

CSP is available to all producers regardless of operation size, crops produced, or geographic location. Eligible lands include cropland, pastureland, rangeland, non-industrial private forest land, and agricultural land under the jurisdiction of an Indian tribe. Under the final rule, the program retains the broad features outlined in the interim final rule, including:

- CSP pays participants for conservation performance – the higher the performance, the higher the payment.
- Producers get credit both for conservation measures they have already implemented and for new measures they agree to add.
- CSP is offered in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Pacific and Caribbean area through continuous sign-up, with announced cut-off dates for ranking and funding applications.

The program's new features include the following:

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- Higher payment rate for additional conservation performance. USDA is implementing a split payment structure, with one payment rate for existing conservation activities and a higher payment rate for new activities.

- Higher payment limit. The total contract limitation for joint operations is increased from \$200,000 to \$400,000, with annual payment limits increased from \$40,000 to \$80,000 to fairly compensate joint operations that produce environmental benefit levels needed to earn the payments.

- New minimum payment. To directly encourage participation by small-scale, historically underserved producers, the rule establishes a minimum payment of \$1,000.

- Pastured cropland. “Pastured cropland” is added as a new designation with a higher payment than “pastureland” because of the greater income foregone by producers who maintain a grass-based livestock production system on land suitable for cropping.

- Enhancements. Some conservation enhancements work better when implemented as a system and under the new rule are offered as enhancement “bundles.” Participants who implement such comprehensive bundles get higher rankings and higher payments.

- Resource-conserving crop rotation. In response to extensive public comment, the definition of “resource-conserving crop rotation” is revised to require the use of grass and/or legumes.

Potential applicants are encouraged to use the CSP self-screening checklist to determine whether CSP is suitable for their operation and apply prior to the closing date of June 25, 2010, when applications will be scored, ranked, and funded. The checklist, which highlights basic information about CSP eligibility requirements, contract obligations, and payments, and additional information about CSP, may be obtained from the national [CSP Web site](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/new_csp/csp.html) (www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/new\_csp/csp.html).

USDA published the CSP interim final rule on July 29, 2009. NRCS received 1,534 comments and reviewed and considered each one. Responses to the comments are incorporated in the final rule, which can be viewed at: <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2010/pdf/2010-12699.pdf>

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